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VilnaScribe

THE VILNA SHUL

Boston's Center
for Jewish Culture
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Can Dreams Come True?

Dreams are realized by a visionary who is committed to a cause and is able to inspire a team of people to work together. I have been lucky to follow some amazingly talented and dedicated presidents of this organization, and my predecessor Jack Swartz is one such person who believed in the power of teamwork and created a strong organizational structure. The Vilna is now a unique venue for discovering Jewish identity in Boston. Much has been accomplished during his presidency; still more needs to be done to reach our dreams.

On September 25, 2011, we will be paying tribute to one of the “saviors” of the Vilna Shul. The event is titled, “Celebrating Richard Mintz and Honoring His Dream.” I was fortunate enough to know Richard for five years, and he was one of those visionary people. When I first met him, I did not see a “dreamer”; instead I saw a man who had the spirit of a true sense of mission that saved a critical part of our history and spiritual life for generations to come.

As I learned more about Richard's heritage, I saw so many parallels with his own background. His grandfather came to America from a small town (shtetl) in Vilna Gubernya to America to follow a dream. He arrived at Ellis Island along with the masses of immigrants, and Herman, his six-year old son and Richard's father, followed him in 1892 with the rest of his family. Living in the North End among many Italians and Irish, it seems that Richard never forgot where his father came from, and how his whole family worked together to achieve a better life. Richard tells a story of his father doing well in the English High School while still performing communal work at the North End Settlement House. Richard followed his father's ideals, knowing that the roots of success are grounded in the commitment to meaningful work and worthy dreams, while remembering the past, caring for those around you, and planning for future generations.

When I became more familiar with Richard, I realized I was in the presence of a leader, but not a usual one. He was a humble man, and he made everyone around him feel good about themselves. He inspired people toward commitment to service. The “project” of saving the Vilna Shul was not just a project; instead, it was a mission, a calling, and a duty. His strong devotion to a cause was not just intellect but also heart. That was his driving passion. He surrounded himself with talented people who shared his vision in order to accomplish his dream of saving and restoring the Vilna Shul to its glory.

So much has happened here at the Vilna Shul since Richard with others strove to save the shul from destruction. Just as Richard's grandfather created a foundation for his family to thrive, Richard and his family team have stabilized the structure of the building; just as his father would do community service, Richard has inspired many to be part of this vibrant place, filled with programs and exhibits; just as Richard's grandmother was a midwife for so many births, Richard helped to give birth to the young adult group, Havurah on the Hill to be part of the Vilna Shul's future.

JOIN US this Fall in celebrating Richard; JOIN US in making this place a center for learning and spiritual growth; JOIN US by supporting us as members and donors.

So dreams can come true, especially if we all work together to make them a reality.

Deborah Feinstein

President of the Vilna Shul, Boston's Center for Jewish Culture



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The Value of What We Do

The Board of Directors, past and present, along with scores of donors have preserved the Vilna Shul over the years. Our goal of promoting an enduring Jewish identity in Boston is being met with great success. Tourists from around the globe find us through Fodor's, the National Park Service, the Black Heritage Trail, or when they were seeking the oldest synagogue in their travels from city to city, or bringing in their friends and relatives to see something historic in Boston that so many have never seen before. We sit at the table in discussions with the Paul Revere House, the Old North Church, the Boston Aquarium and the MFA. We have received substantial funding from the State of Massachusetts and most recently received a grant of \$90,800 from American Express through the National Trust for Historic Places. There is a deep, rich and proud history of Jews in Boston and we are the place that a Jewish historical presence is publicly displayed.

We are humbled by the acceptance we have received, and are proud that the Vilna Shul is taking its rightful place with the historic sites of Boston. The Vilna Shul is the Jewish museum of Boston, and we, the staff and Directors, are proud of that. However, something that we are not proud of is the current state of the building itself, with its mold, deterioration and lack of universal access. It has only been preserved and rehabilitated to the extent that the rate of deterioration is much slower than before, and most visitors are able to access the building. But we are not content with "slower" and "most." Recently, a person with a severe mold allergy had to leave a tour and sit on the front patio, because she physically could not be in the building. Time and again, visitors who have trouble with stairs find it impossible to climb to the second floor sanctuary, and thus miss out on the opportunity to see the heart and soul of the building.

If you believe that the Vilna Shul is a historic treasure that needs to be preserved for future generations, and that it perpetuates a vital Jewish presence in Boston, then please support us. If you see the value in what is being done here, please help us to improve the building and make it open and accessible to all. We have come so far in restoring this hidden treasure, but there is still so much left to be accomplished in order to do justice to this special building and to give all of its visitors the ability to experience it fully.



Steven M. Greenberg
Executive Director

Please help us preserve and perpetuate our Jewish Identity.

The Vilna Shul, Boston's Center for Jewish Culture is once again a community hub in this former neighborhood of European immigrants. Energy, spirit and life are here today as the Vilna Shul hosts educational and cultural events, including speakers, movies, exhibits and concerts. Bar and bat mitzvahs, weddings, brises and baby namings are taking place here. Once a month "Havurah On the Hill" celebrates a lyrical Shabbat learning service for young adults.

Gifts to the Annual Fund make these programs and events happen. Young adults come through our doors to pray and find a place in their own Jewish identity. School and camp groups come and learn about the immigrants from our heritage. Unaffiliated Jews come and find a place to explore their spiritual needs, and visitors from all over the world begin to understand the Boston Jewish Experience. Your financial contributions make all of this possible.

Please help us to preserve the experiences of the past, establish meaningful connections to the present and develop pathways to an enduring Jewish Identity for the future. Preserving and restoring the Vilna Shul perpetuates our Jewish Identity.

Please, support us today with a donation to our Annual Fund. You may make your gift online at <http://www.vilnashul.org/index.php/support> or return the enclosed pledge envelope.

Together we can protect this historic building and share our unique story.

EUROPEAN ART SCHOLAR
VISITS THE VILNA SHUL:
OUR HIDDEN TREASURE IN BOSTON

The Vilna Shul received a surprise visit in May from Eugeny Kotlyar, a prominent European art scholar with extensive academic and practical experience in various aspects of synagogue art. Eugeny works at the Academy of Art and Design in Kharkiv, Ukraine, and is currently in post-doctorate studies working on his second dissertation on the theme of “East European Wall-Painting Decoration in the Shtetl Synagogues and their Spread in North America and Eretz-Israel”. It was his research on painting in the old immigrant shuls that brought him to the United States, and he specifically sought out the Vilna Shul as a prime example of synagogue wall art.

Eugeny observed that the Vilna Shul is a remarkable illustration of two trends: a transfer of the Eastern European Jewry’s traditions to the US (and Boston in particular), and the Americanization of Jewish immigrants. The latter trend is especially visible in the exterior, but also in the appointment of the sanctuary. The women’s gallery is situated at the side, to the left of the ark, which is quite original and not seen in Europe. It is almost the same size as the men’s part of the hall.

He made many observations about the Vilna’s wall art. To begin with, the very fact that the synagogue contains pieces of paintings created at various times allows one to suggest the original program of murals. Cleared and renovated a year ago, walls in the women’s gallery with paintings on the theme of the Cave of Machpelah and Rachel’s Tomb indicate good prospects of such a restoration.

Eugeny assumes that scenes from the series “The holy places in Eretz-Israel” exist on other walls of the women’s gallery as well. These motifs are well defined, but there has never been a strict “canonized” set of themes. All of this is a living tradition, and he, as a researcher and designer of synagogue interiors, is very intrigued by the paintings hidden behind more recent layers. Certain fragments of the columns and palm trees hint at more interesting themes yet to be uncovered.

When he examined the synagogue with Mark Nystedt, the Vilna Shul’s lead historian, Eugeny carefully studied the ceiling, and suggested that along its perimeter the Zodiac signs may have been depicted; such was an accepted practice everywhere. Another indirect piece of evidence in support of this guess is the surviving fragments of images in the rectangles, and the geometry of their arrangement on the ceiling. One can clearly see that there were exactly 12 such “patches”. Unfortunately they were not signed (or maybe they were, but the letters were originally located outside the painting and were later hidden under more recent layers of paint). It is also difficult to identify the single fully uncovered fragment near the corner between the women’s and men’s galleries. At first Eugeny thought that under the three trees he could see a sign of “Cancer” or “Scorpio”, but on closer examination, became doubtful. However, the other partially uncovered fragment of the renovated walls sheds some light on his hypothesis. There is visible a roof of a house with a chimney. Eugeny thinks that if we were to completely clear this picturesque small rectangle, he would be able with some certitude to outline the program of painting of the ceiling.

Eugeny’s visit to the Vilna Shul was fortunate for us in many ways. His expertise helped shed light on the mystery of the uncovered murals, providing us with possibilities of what will someday be revealed. His enthusiasm for the Shul may also find its way into future articles he writes for professional publications, which would significantly heighten our visibility and recognition among professionals and the general public. His endorsement of the Vilna Shul would lend increased credibility to our place among the historic Jewish treasures of the world.

A TRIBUTE TO RICHARD MINTZ

Many people who have been involved with the Vilna Shul from its beginnings as a museum and cultural center have warm memories of Richard Mintz and his devotion to this place. They recall working with him in the early stages of securing and stabilizing the building and in the ensuing process of determining how the Shul would be used. Some are even able to attribute their involvement with and interest in the Shul to him. We asked several past presidents of the Board of Directors and others who have been involved from the beginning to share their memories of Richard with us.

Richard Usen became involved with the Vilna Shul when he volunteered his expertise as a Registered Professional Facilities Engineer to help evaluate the old abandoned building. In February



of 1990, Richard Usen met with Barbara Hunt, a lawyer who was working for Mintz Levin at the time. Together they explored the frozen, boarded up building with flashlights, finding it in miserable shape. Richard recalls, “We went across the street to warm up over coffee and Barbara told me how one day she was going down on the elevator with Richard Mintz and mentioned to him what she was doing and got him interested in participating. Initially his participation was in the negotiations for the purchase and the creation of The Boston Center for Jewish Heritage organization.” Over the years, Richard Mintz’s devotion to the Vilna Shul and its unfolding mission grew ever deeper.

Debby Cohen remembers her interactions with Richard Mintz at the Vilna Shul with fondness: “At our introduction, Richard Mintz turned both his typical laser-like focus and kindly warm regard in my direction. Richard was supremely interested in people. He enjoyed knowing everything about them, and he particularly enjoyed knowing what propelled those who passionately volunteered for the Vilna Shul. I once used the word ‘restore’ in something I was writing about the Shul. Richard suggested I use the word ‘redeem’ instead. And that said a whole lot about Richard and his feelings about the Vilna Shul. He studied Torah in a weekly downtown group, and I know that gave him both intellectual pleasure and a sense of being part of an unbroken chain. Rabbi Avraham Kahn of Toronto said: ‘The truth is that there is a continuation of the holiness from the Revelation at Mount Sinai right up until today.’ Richard felt that continuation with all of his penetrating brain and his big heart. For Richard, the Vilna Shul was an important link in that holy chain. Richard is missed, and his memory is a blessing.”

Myles Striar joins the others in remembering the wonderful and unique person Richard Mintz was, while also recalling his

human-ness: “Nothing in what I have heard or read about Richard in the three months since his death has indicated that Richard was in any way flawed. Richard, who was my friend, and before that, my attorney, was of course, flawed. For all of his genuine kindness and his gracious manner, Richard could get good and angry and use language which stuck and stung. That said, I would like to add that I have never met anyone who was so often right and who so rarely misunderstood what was going on and what was at stake. He was the reason I got involved with the Vilna and joined the Board, where I eventually became President. I did not belong to any Jewish organization, but since The Vilna Center for Jewish Heritage was secular, neither religious nor political, and no longer a synagogue, I welcomed the opportunity to participate, especially as it was led by Richard, whom I knew and admired. I thought that if anyone could make it work, Richard could.”

Myles recalls a disagreement among Board members over the question of whether weddings held in the Shul must be conducted by a rabbi. “A battle ensued, and Richard, summarizing the arguments on both sides, calmed the waters. Then, as always, he treated my opinions with respect. Richard demonstrated time and again that he understood the problems with which we were dealing by summarizing the situation eloquently. I have never known anyone who could do that so well. And he never smirked. He did, on the contrary, greet both those with whom he disagreed and those with whom he agreed, warmly. And when it was all over, he was equally gracious. I miss him. Would that he could be cloned.”

A TUESDAY SHABBAT IN GRÖBZIG

By Rachel Cylus

It was Tuesday at 10:30 am in the village of Gröbzig – population 3,000 – in the middle of the central German state of Sachsen-Anhalt. But, for eleven eight year-olds from a nearby Protestant elementary school, it was Friday night near sundown, and time to prepare for their first Shabbat. The children sat eagerly at old-fashioned desks in a mid-19th century Jewish schoolhouse, hands shooting into the air to volunteer to serve as mother, father, daughter or son in a model Jewish family preparing for the Sabbath. A table in one corner of the schoolhouse was covered with a white tablecloth, table settings, a bottle of wine (grape juice of course), candlesticks and two loaves of neatly covered challah.

There was an element of this set-up that felt warmly familiar - a throwback to my own mock-Shabbat tables in preschool, and Friday afternoons at Jewish summer camp growing up. And of course a part of this experience that was quite different. This was, after all, a first glimpse into Judaism for the young participants. There were moments of confusion - What does Shabbat celebrate? Something with Jesus perhaps? When does Shabbat take place? Not Sunday? And of course the initial shock of learning that both talking on the phone and use of Nintendo are considered “work” and therefore not allowed during traditional observance of Shabbat.

I had my own moments of unease during the half hour demonstration. I wondered, as the children recited, in German translation, blessings over the challah, the candles, the wine, whether I would feel comfortable reciting prayers, if say, I were to take part in a Christian or Muslim religious activity. Would the children, who had probably never interacted with a Jew before, besides glancing unknowingly at me, quietly filming them from the back of the room, take meaning away from this experience? What would they tell their parents and friends about Shabbat in Gröbzig?

Such questions are not new to Marion Mendez, director of the Museum Synagogue Gröbzig since 1996. Gröbzig boasts that this place is, perhaps, the most complete intact Jewish complex in Germany - a late 18th century synagogue, schoolhouse, community building, several other small houses and a cemetery. After being voluntarily given up by a much diminished Jewish community in 1934 (the small schoolhouse was used for services until 1938), the town of Gröbzig converted the synagogue into a Heimatsmuseum or Homeland Museum (a local history and artifacts collection), allowing the building to survive intact through the Second World War and the GDR before restoration and reclamation of its Jewish history in the late 1980s.

Mendez’s goal through the many programs the museum offers is to create more dynamic and interactive tolerance education. This may be the only Shabbat someone ever attends, she explains. The goal is that when they think about Judaism after leaving, they will see it as something less foreign, something with modern and historical significance, something they have been a part of, even if only for a day.

BROWN BAG LECTURE

in memory of local Jewish scholar and Vilna Shul member Estelle Shohet Brettman (1925-1991)

by Jessica Dello Russo

The Vilna Shul’s “Brown Bag” lecture of April 13th on the Jewish Catacombs of Rome paid special tribute to the memory of the late Estelle Shohet Brettman, a long time Beacon Hill resident and member of the Vilna Shul. She spent many years researching ancient Jewish and Christian catacombs in Italy and other areas of the Mediterranean. The granddaughter of a rabbi and great-granddaughter of immigrant Jews who had first settled on Beacon Hill’s North Slope, Mrs. Brettman wrote that in attending services at the Vilna Shul, she truly felt she had come “home”. While one of the synagogue’s last female members, she was also one of the very first to advocate for its preservation. In 1989, in vivid testimony before the Boston Landmarks Commission, Mrs. Brettman expressed how the “specter of the lost synagogues of the past” seen in her travels now haunted her when she “considered the fate of the Vilna Shul”. She spoke convincingly of the need to act now for the sake of future generations of Jews who would otherwise search in vain for Jewish life in places like the Vilna Shul. In the end, unlike the Jewish buildings from much older times, the Vilna Shul did not fall into a state of complete ruin. Bits and pieces of its physical past remain today as witnesses to the new Jewish presence in the building, one that celebrates the living traditions of Judaism in a setting to cherish and protect. Sadly, Mrs. Brettman’s untimely death from cancer in 1991 did not allow her to see the realization of her dream for the Vilna Shul as a historic site open to all. But her dedication to the “preservation of our past which aims to teach us how to live with and understand our neighbors” continues to inspire the organization she founded, the International Catacomb Society, as well as efforts to raise awareness of the nature and value of the Jewish and Christian catacombs of Rome. To paraphrase Proverbs 10:7, used in a number of the Jewish epitaphs from Rome, the lecture on the catacombs that Wednesday at the Vilna Shul was “in memory of a Just One, with blessing”.

Information on visiting the Jewish catacombs is on the ICS website: www.catacombsociety.org

Breaking Ground: Remarkable Jewish Women of Boston's West End

On Sunday, May 8, 2011, over 40 people made the Vilna Shul part of their Mother's Day celebration by attending a bagel brunch and presentation entitled "Breaking Ground: Remarkable Jewish Women of Boston's West End." The presentation, part of our ongoing Conversations at the Vilna Series, was given by Helaine Davis and Linda Stern, Boston librarians and researchers. Those in attendance were treated to stories about eight Jewish women who made invaluable contributions to their West End communities and beyond in the realms of education, social reform, athletics, law, and more! Read on to learn about these remarkable women:



Lina Frank Hecht (1848-1921) A leading member of the German Jewish community, Lina Hecht funded a Hebrew Sunday School. She re-established the Hebrew Ladies Sewing Circle which later grew into the Hebrew Industrial School in the North End. Hecht's programs offered settlement services to newly arriving Eastern European immigrants, a trend that was growing across the country. Later

Hecht funded a Hebrew Industrial School for boys in the West End which was moved to Bowdoin Street, reorganized as a co-ed facility and renamed as "The Hecht Neighborhood House" —after her death—and relocated to Dorchester in 1936 as "The Hecht House".

Golde Bamber (ca. 1868-193?) Bamber was raised by German immigrant parents in Boston and Waltham, and educated in the Oratory program at Boston University. Lina Hecht hired Bamber to teach in her Sunday school and for the Hebrew Ladies Sewing Circle. Bamber encouraged Hecht to open a settlement house to educate newly arriving immigrant children. Hecht founded the Hebrew Industrial School in the North End in 1890 and hired Bamber as the director. She introduced vocational and educational programs, a "Soap and Water Club," all designed to help daughters of immigrant families to learn to become more Americanized. In 1892 Hecht set up a similar program in the West End to also include boys. Within the first five years of the Industrial School's founding, Bamber's programs trained more than 1200 immigrant children.

Senda Berenson (Abbott) (1868-1954) Berenson is considered the "Mother of Women's Basketball." She was the first woman inducted into the Basketball Hall of Fame in Springfield, Mass. in 1984. Born in Lithuania, her family immigrated to Boston's West End in 1874. After graduating from the Boston Normal School of Gymnastics in 1892, she became the first Director of Physical Education at Smith College and adapted the new game of Basketball for her female students. Berenson served as the editor of Spalding's Official Basketball Guide for Women and served as chairwoman of the U.S. Women's Basketball Committee.

Frances Stern (1873-1947) Considered the founder of the food clinic method, Stern was born in Boston to German-Jewish immigrant parents. She dedicated her life to social reform, education, and nutrition. In 1890, Lina Hecht hired her to teach proper nutrition to immigrant women and children in her settlement houses. In 1895, she co-founded the Louisa May Alcott Club in the South End with Isabel Hyams and also worked with

tuberculosis patients in Boston. During WWI, she worked with the Red Cross in Paris to help with children's nutrition. Her book, *Food Service for the Worker*, teaching and advisory work all focused on the importance of good nutrition. Stern set up a food clinic in the Boston Dispensary in 1918 which is known today as "The Frances Stern Nutrition Center," a division of Tufts/New England Medical Center.

Mary Antin (1881-1949) Born in Polotzk, in the Russian Pale, Antin and her family came to Boston in 1894. They lived in the South and West Ends and later Chelsea, Revere, and Dorchester. Her best-selling autobiographical work, *The Promised Land*, was published in 1912 and remains the classic narrative of 19th – 20th century immigrant experience in the United States. She spoke publicly for open immigration throughout her life and became a supporter for the establishment of the State of Israel after WWI.

Rose Finkelstein Norwood (1889 – 1980) A Russian immigrant, Norwood spent her life as a labor organizer beginning with a strike of the Boston Telephone Operators' Union in 1919. She became president of the Boston Women's Trade Union League in 1941 until it disbanded in 1950. She stood up for the right of married women to hold jobs, and helped to unionize Jordan Marsh employees and Boston Public Librarians. She worked for the creation of public daycare centers, and for the defense efforts for Sacco and Vanzetti. Mayor Kevin White appointed her to his advisory council on elderly affairs.

Jennie Loitman Barron (1891-1969) Raised in the West End, Barron received her Bachelors, Law and Masters of Law degrees from Boston University. An active suffragist, she served in the judiciary of Massachusetts for over 30 years and was appointed the first woman judge in Massachusetts Superior Court in 1957. Named 'Mother of the Year' in 1959, she served as Honorary President of Beth Israel Hospital, and was the first president of the Women's Division of The American Jewish Congress.

Fanny Goldstein (1895-1961) Born in Russia, Goldstein immigrated to the North End with her family in 1900. She studied at Simmons College and became a librarian. She was the first Jewish woman to be appointed director of a branch library in Boston—at the West End Library. Goldstein developed the Judaica collection for the Boston Public Library and was founder of National Jewish Book Week in 1927, during a time while books by Jewish authors were being burned in Germany. As a social activist, she was an instrumental part of the "Saturday Evening Girls" in the North End, where she helped immigrant Jewish and Italian girls with reading and language skills.

This program beautifully exemplified one of the goals we strive for every day at the Vilna Shul: to put faces on the people who lived in the West End at the height of the immigrant era, to give life to their stories. There are those whose stories are known, like the women above, but there are countless others whose names we might never hear and the details of whose lives we can only guess at. We at the Vilna Shul are dedicated to keeping the memory of both the named and unnamed alive, and to revealing the extraordinary nature of their ordinary lives.

This program will be repeated next Mother's Day, Sunday, May 13, 2012.

Havurah on the Hill

is a non-denominational, lay-led organization that holds monthly Friday night services and other Jewish programs for young adults and the young at heart. Services are followed by an engaging speaker and a kosher buffet dinner.

We began the spring with a special visit from the Boston-Haifa Connection Hatikvah Soldiers Mission at our April event. In an effort to promote understanding and friendship between Israeli and American Jews and others who support Israel, a group of Israel Defense Force soldiers traveled from Haifa to Boston to make personal connections with various groups. We were joined by two of these young soldiers, who shared information with us about themselves and their experiences in the military.

In May, we heard from Israel Bonan, an Egyptian-Jewish refugee. Mr. Bonan shared his personal Exodus experience, that of his jailing and deportation from Egypt at the start of the Six Day War in 1967. He discussed issues that the Mizrahi community, the "Forgotten Refugees," currently faces, from the rewriting of their history to expunge their contributions from the Middle East narrative to the Arab governments' claims that they left of their own volition, and what organizations like Justice for Jews from Arab Countries are doing about it.

Three-time United States Poet Laureate, Robert Pinsky, was our guest speaker in June. In addition to his many collections of poetry, Mr. Pinsky has also recently written a prose book, *The Life of David*, from which he read and discussed. The book is a fascinating retelling of the Biblical David stories, which examines the complex David in all of his triumphs and failures. Mr. Pinsky also shared about his career as a poet, including its early beginnings when he, as a young boy, became fascinated with the sounds of words.

Loren Galler Rabinowitz, 2010's Miss Massachusetts, spent the evening with us in July. Having just relinquished her crown to the incoming titleholder, Loren spoke about being entered into the running for the state pageant by her friends as a joke, her unexpected win, and her following year of service and participation in the Miss America pageant. With great candor and humor, Loren described what it was like to be the only Jewish contestant at the national competition, and the many instances of cultural insensitivity and ignorance she experienced along the way. We were inspired by the ways in which she used these difficulties as positive opportunities to educate others and break down stereotypes about the Jewish people.

In August, our guest speaker was Dr. Leonard Marcus. Dr. Marcus is founding Co-Director of the National Preparedness Leadership Initiative, a joint program of Harvard School of Public Health and Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. He discussed the ways in which his research, teaching, and consultation have played a key role in national and international terrorism and emergency preparedness and response. Dr. Marcus described his concept of "meta-leadership," "overarching leadership that strategically links the work of different agencies and levels of government," and how crucial it is to successful disaster response.

We hope you will join us for the upcoming Havurah on the Hill High Holiday services! Please visit www.vilnashul.org for more details.

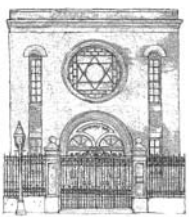
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